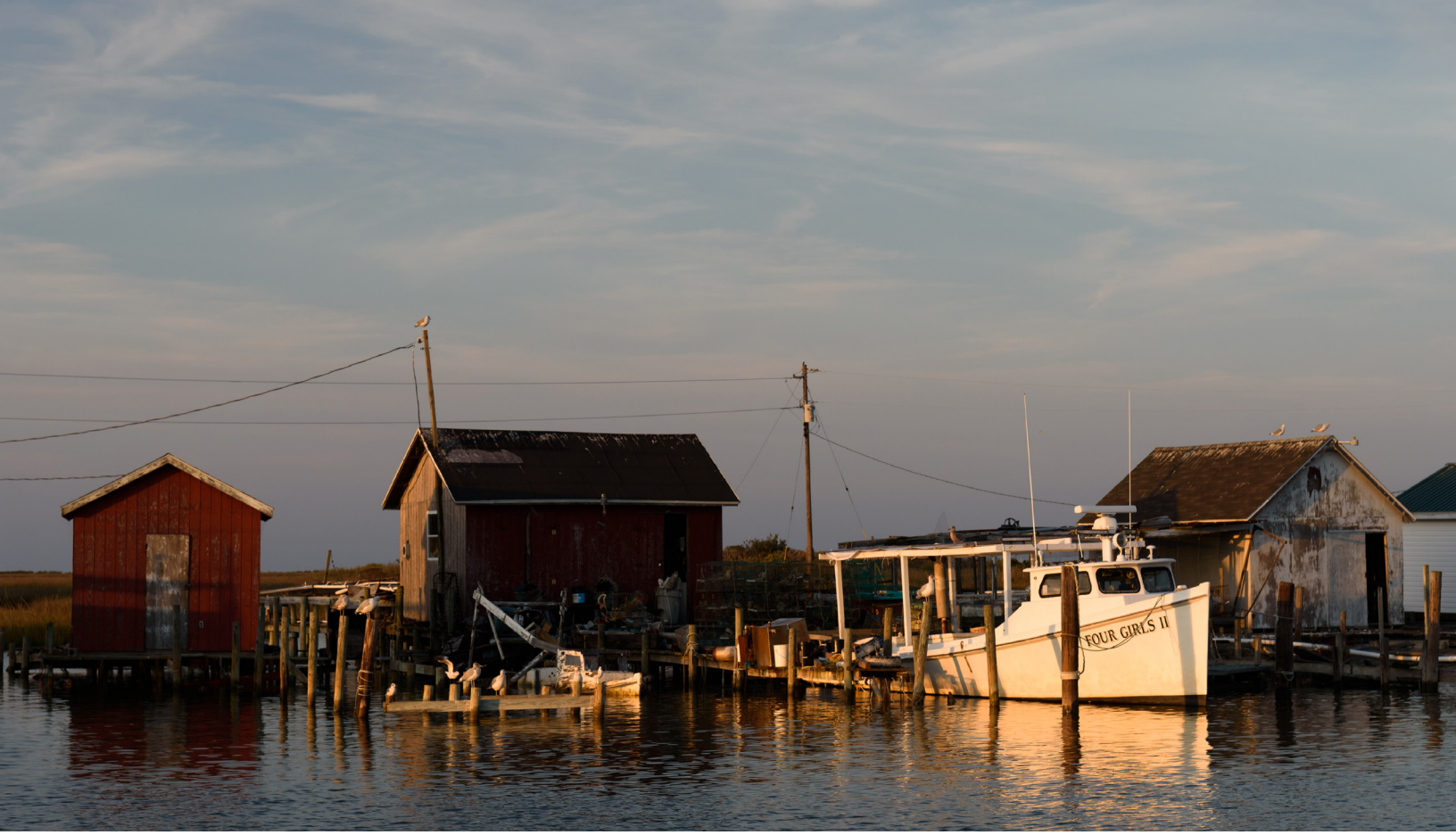


Tangier

by

Peter Hegeman

The sail to Tangier would not be a particularly long trip. Nor was the place really all that hard to get to. There was a big ferry that ran there from Reedville, Virginia, on the Western shore of Chesapeake Bay and another smaller one that serviced the island from Crisfield, Maryland, on the Eastern Shore. Even making the trip in your own sail boat was not so very arduous, people sailed there all the time. But the island still loomed large in my imagination. It was something I'd talked about forever, and somehow had never make happen.

I'd first glimpsed the place twenty years before, one July when I helped a friend deliver a boat from Havre de Grace, at the very head of the Bay, to the Virginia Nature Conservancy in Wachapreague, on the Atlantic side of the Virginia Eastern Shore. It had been raining all afternoon and was getting dark. A stiff wind blew out of the northeast. We motored through the channel between the main south island and the now depopulated island to the north looking for a place to tie up for the night. Visibility was tough in the fog and rain. We could see crab boats tied up to the wharves, rocking in the chop that made its way in from the sound to the east, but nobody was moving, not much sign of life. In a moment even the crab houses were behind us, and there was nothing but the gray water and a few clumps of cordgrass.

An unreal city, floating in the summer fog.

Somehow the closest that Pat and I had gotten was a couple trips back and forth between Reedville, on the western shore of the Bay, near the mouth of the first river south of the Potomac, and Onancock, about twenty-five miles across the Bay to the east southeast, on the bay side of Virginia Eastern Shore. On that course, by the time you see Tangier, the solid land of Reedville and the Northern neck has sunk into a blue smudge on the western horizon. The Eastern Shore is still just beyond your ken. Tangier itself floats over the water as a shimmering mirage, a fringe of green topped by elongated white houses, a nice water tower, tall steeples. A foreign country, almost, a mysterious island just out of reach.

There's something just in the name. It's Tangier Island, but the whole island is also Tangier, Va., the town, so everybody just calls it Tangier, as in If you see her, say hello, she might be in Tangier. Nobody seems to know where the name came from, nobody even pretends to. If you want to find it on Google Maps you have to look for Tangier, Virginia. Just plain Tangier puts you in Africa.

The island was settled in the 1600s (i.e., settled by white people; the soon to be exterminated natives had fished there for eons). Some of the earliest families are still there, and until the sixties the islanders spoke a dialect that I'd always heard was basically unchanged from Elizabethan times, though the linguists that study these things disagree and say that it's really just one of many distinctive regional accents, albeit one that in the face of modernity has survived longer than most.

The whole place is about four feet above sea level, and like the rest of the land around the lower Chesapeake, it's sinking fast. The people that live on Tangier, or at least the people that are willing to talk to newspapers and magazines, don't generally believe in climate change: they say they are out on the water daily and just don't see it. But sea levels are rising nonetheless, currently at the rate of four millimeters a year—six to eight inches since 1900. About half of that is due to the land slowly sinking for reasons ranging from the asteroid that hit the region millions of years ago to effects still playing out from the last ice age maybe ten thousand years ago to all the water that's getting sucked out of the aquifers because of rampant development around Norfolk and Hampden Roads. The rest is because of global warming.

Whatever the reason, the water rises relative to the land. Storms grow more severe, bigger waves lash at sandy, fragile beaches, the island melts away. In the 1930's and 40's more than a thousand people lived on the island; around five hundred remain. The Army Corps of Engineers gives the island twenty-five to fifty years. There's talk of a sea wall that would surround the island, or one that would at least protect it from the worst of the damage. Donald Trump, back during the 2016 campaign called the mayor and told him not to worry about rising sea level, the island would be fine. This seems to have been interpreted by the islanders as an ironclad promise to build the sea wall that they desperately believe will save them, save their community that goes back to colonial times.

The modern economy hasn't been much kinder to the Island than geology or climate change. For two centuries the place prospered, or at least did OK as what was basically an offshore fishing camp in the middle of Chesapeake Bay. As recently as fifty years ago nearly every male resident—give or take a pastor or two—worked on the water. Now maybe half to a third still get their living fishing. Lately there's a certain amount of talk about tourism replacing or at least supplementing fishing in the town's economy. A big excursion ferry comes over from Reedville, and the day-trippers wander the streets around the ferry docks and buy a few souvenirs and maybe take the odd golf cart tour. There's a place to rent bikes now, and at least one bed-and-breakfast, and if you don't mind an early dinner with only iced tea or coke to drink there are a couple of restaurants whose soft crabs are sublime. Still, it's hard to see how schlepping tourists around in a golf cart could ever be quite the same as running a fishing boat the way your father had before you and his father before him, all the way back as long as anyone could remember.

Many of the young men who can no longer get work fishing now crew on the tugboats. The island is officially dry, but as a tugboat skipper we know tells us, that don't mean they don't drink. Captain Steve's old man was a tugboat skipper out of Norfolk, and Captain Steve himself has worked all along the Gulf and East Coasts. There's not much he hasn't seen. His company, like many, employs its crews for two weeks at a time: twelve-hour days, two weeks on, then two weeks off. Two weeks of drug testing and mandatory abstinence, then two weeks off for a nonstop bender back home. The men leave the boat clean and sober, go home to the island, and return two weeks later with the jitters and shakes. Captain Steve calls his tug the Betty Ford Clinic.

There's not really any place to anchor in Tangier proper and only one place where a recreational vessel can to tie up to a dock: Park's Marina. I'd read about the marina ahead of time, and I remembered the current that ran through the channel from the delivery trip so many years before. I was not at all sure we'd be able to get our particular boat into some of the slips, so I called the owner, Milton Parks, and made sure that he'd have space on the tee head of his dock, which I was certain would work for us. He said he'd hold the spot for us, and that he'd check in with us on vhf radio about an hour before our eta.

"Now what's your boat's name?" he said.

"Susan B. Merryman." For the name of a boat it was quite a mouthful and not always the easiest thing to get across to somebody on the other end of either a telephone or a VHF radio, but Susan B. Merryman was what Dad had named her, and Susan B. Merryman was what she would remain.

"What?" Mr. Parks was a pretty old guy. I suspected that his hearing was no longer the best.

"The Susan B." I said. This was the shortened version I'd come to use with the pilots and tugboat skippers.

"The what?"

I told him again

"Tell you what," he said, "I can't remember boat names anymore. I'm going to call you George, he said. "You hear me calling the yacht George, that's you.

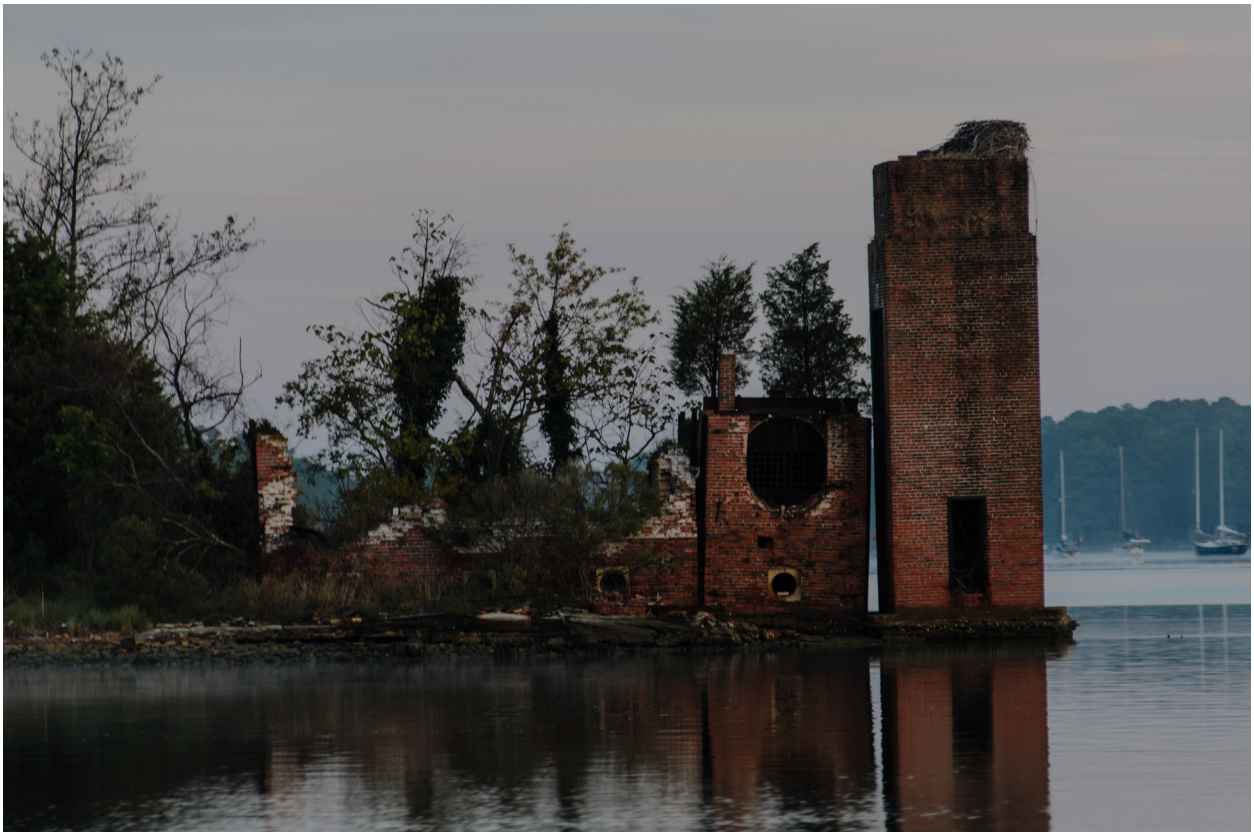
Pat and I got a good laugh out of the yacht George. "George" had been my mother's unisex, all purpose name for her children. As in "Jay, Pa…, Pe…—GEORGE." We had a pet raccoon that we named George just to confuse things a little further. George would ride around on my sister's shoulder standing as straight up as a diplomat, with one hand holding on to her shoulder-length hair. He'd turn his head if he heard the name "George" but quickly learned to tell when it only applied to a human and not to him.

Yacht George we would be.

By the time we'd picked up our friend Dave in Reedville for the run to Tangier, Pat and I had already been on the boat for ten days or so. On the way south we had some lousy weather and had stopped in Solomons, Maryland, on the Patuxent River, a peninsula up from the Potomac. The Marine Museum there has a nice exhibit that showed how the form of the bay has changed over time, how the land had been shaped by the impact of the meteor back in dinosaur days and more recently by the retreat of the glaciers at the end of the ice age, all the forces shaping Tangier's unenviable fate.

We had been sailing the Chesapeake Bay for many years now, and had learned, sometimes to our embarrassment, how shallow land often extended quite far from the shore, but we thought that the shoal water was just the way that things were, or was the result of the waterways silting up after the forests were cut down for agriculture. We'd also noticed how all over the lower bay the charts were marked with "ruins" far out in the water, but had never really understood why this was so. I'd thought (without any supporting evidence or any real effort beyond guesswork) that the ruins must have originally been built on pilings, at the end of long docks. The exhibits at the Marine Museum made all of that as clear as could be: the whole place was sinking relative to the sea. Here in Reedville it was especially clear. You could see the ruins still standing, a long ways from land, the remains of big brick structures that must have been pretty impressive not so long ago at all, once as permanent as the stars and safely on the shore, now crumbling into ruins as the land under them sank, as rising water lapped at their foundations.

Now with Dave aboard, we motored out of Cockerel Creek, past the ruins of the old oyster plants,



past the seemingly unsinkable menhaden processing plant with the giant factory fishing ships tied up at its wharfs. The ships range up and down the east coast and into the Gulf of Mexico and work with spotter planes that locate the schools of menhaden from the air. Then the ships race to surround the fish with enormous purse seines and suck the fish into their holds with giant vacuum hoses. Back in Reedville the fish get cooked down into fish oil and meal that's used as the feedstock for everything from cat food to paint. The Fisherman's Museum in town has some good exhibits not only about the historical fishery (the first menhaden plant in Reedville started operation in 1878 and consisted of a couple big kettles and a cider press), but about the present-day operation as well. The quantities of fish sucked up seem unimaginably large, but the company maintains that it only harvests a sustainably small fraction of the actual population. Years ago the menhaden ships were painted battleship gray. When Pat and I first saw them in the distance, we thought they were naval vessels of some kind, they looked that imposing. Sometime later the plant was bought out by a bigger operator known as Omega Protein, and the whole operation got rebranded. Nowadays there's a nice logo on the factory stacks, and the once battleship gray ships have been painted in an ecologically soothing blue.

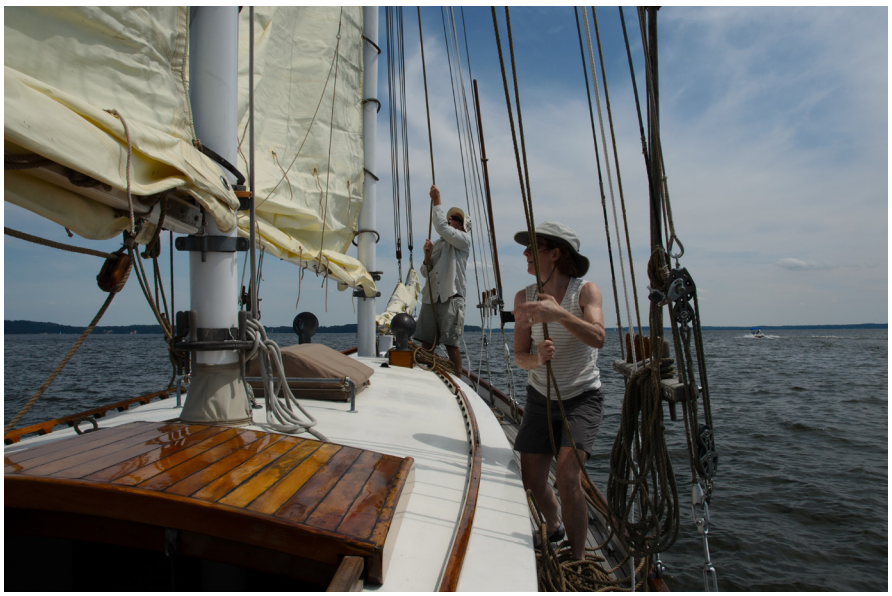
We set sail in the mouth of the Great Wicomico. The wind was out of the north, just the right speed to give us a nice close reach to Tangier.

The trip felt like a reunion. Tangier itself would be a new experience, but we'd sailed through across this stretch of water many times before. "Was it the last time, or the time before that we had that evil northeast?" one of us asked. Whichever time it was, we thought of the Great Chesapeake Bay Schooner Race, when peer pressure and competitive juices tend to overwhelm common sense, not to mention good seamanship, and we'd crossed this suddenly very big water in the middle of the night with a near gale roaring down the Potomac and kicking up big haystack waves that loomed red and green in the glow of our side lights.

Now the sun shone, the water sparkled, the boat was sailing well. On this course we'd fetch Tangier without touching a sheet. We sailed on like this for an hour, as the sun rose ahead of us and to the right, sailed on across the beautiful blue water flecked with just a few white caps. We were having a great time, laughing, telling stories on one another—perfect conditions, it couldn't have been better.

I went below to light the stove to make coffee on our kerosene stove. Like many things on our boat,

Dad had originally picked this particular stove in part because it was a good, safe choice for our boat—no need for the elaborate safety mechanisms propane required; kerosene was cheap and at least when Dad installed the stove, easily available; the burners produced a lot of heat, etc. etc. etc—but also because he liked the look of it: brushed stainless steel, enameled cast iron, nice bright brass. And also so like many other things on the boat, it wasn't entirely straightforward in its operation. You had to prime it with alcohol first and let the burning alcohol heat up the burner enough so the kerosene would vaporize properly before it got to the little perforated dome where it burned with a hot blue flame. If you did this correctly, the burner roared like a blow torch and life was good in the galley. If you were impatient, or too chintzy with the alcohol preheat, you got a weak, sooty yellow flame that wasn't hot enough to cook with and that even in the moment or two before you gave up and turned it off to start over left a thin film of oily soot on the cabin bulkheads and overhead. All this was second nature to me, I'd been lighting the stove for ages.



I poured out some alcohol for the preheat, struck a match to light it and at the same time turned to catch whatever Dave and Pat were saying—it sounded like a joke. Dave had gotten in a good zinger, I needed a comeback. I stuck my head out the companionway.

What about the coffee? Pat said. Right, the coffee. I turned back to the stove, put off my riposte, I'd get him next time. Not much happening on the stove. No flame, seemingly no heat. I didn't see any alcohol in the little cup under the burner either. Maybe I'd totally spaced, or maybe it had already burned off. The stove was in direct sun, I was wearing polarized sunglasses. Not the easiest viewing conditions. Still I ought to see something, at least the heat shadows from the burning alcohol. Probably I hadn't poured out nearly enough alcohol to do the job, probably it had burned off already. I should add some more, start over, although I also needed to continue to monitor the conversation in the cockpit, Pat and Dave had already tacked onto a new course of witticisms. I didn't want anything else to go by unanswered.

I'd been lighting the stove for so many years now, it was something I could multi-task on. We kept the alcohol for priming in a soft plastic squeeze bottle with a neoprene hose for a spout and a pencil for a stopper. Everybody made fun of the arrangement, but nobody had ever been able to come up with a anything better. I pulled the pencil out of the neoprene hose and slipped the hose under the stove top. Somewhere in the back of my mind the thought bubbled up that what if the alcohol was burning after all and I just couldn't see it in the bright sun, what with polarized glasses and all, but I figured even if it was burning the worst that would happen was a little flare up, everyone knows alcohol doesn't explode like gasoline, that's why it's thought of as the safest of liquid stove fuels.

Kaboom! There was a surprising loud, but somewhat hollow sounding pop, and little white pieces of confetti drifted through the air. It took me an instant to realize what happened—it didn't make sense, I thought, knew that alcohol didn't explode—but as I looked down and saw both the little pieces of plastic that had been the alcohol bottle and also the big and now very visible blue flames dancing all over the cabin sole, all around my feet, I got the idea that reality had just made pretty short work of my ideas of what would and would not explode. It took me another moment to get over an almost paralyzing sense of shame that I'd been so dumbfoundingly stupid and another to realize that I was not going to be able to

will the burning alcohol back into the bottle, the little confetti pieces of plastic to fly back toward my hand to reassemble themselves into a soft plastic squeeze bottle. A moment's inattention, and that for all of the caution and care I'd exercised over the past thirty years sailing, I'd just put us all in real danger with one careless action that I very much knew better than to do. I had the sensation of thoughts, of stupidity, as things that we loose out into the world, that gather lives of their own and that once launched can never be retrieved.

I stepped out of flames, toward the forward fire extinguisher, called out to Pat and Dave we had a fire, said to grab the other fire extinguisher there by the companionway. But now I realized my feet hurt like hell and that the pain was getting worse even though I'd jumped away from the fire on the galley floor. I looked down and saw that there were more of those same blue flames all over the insoles of my bare feet, flickering like two little campfires. They hurt much too much to ignore. I sat down on the port side settee, reached down and patted out the flames on my feet as fast as I could. Already there were a couple big blisters forming under the flames, especially on the right foot, and patting at the flames made the skin wrinkle up and tear. But the flames went out fairly easily, and I also then remembered that water works as well as anything on an alcohol fire, and besides wouldn't leave an awful choking mess all over the whole cabin, so instead of grabbing the forward fire extinguisher I turned back to the galley and reached over the flames and grabbed the tea kettle I had filled up for coffee and poured it all over the cabin sole as if I were watering the geraniums back home. That took care of the bulk of the flames, but there were still a couple more smaller fires in the shelves next to the stove—potholders, a bag of walnuts, another of raisins were all burning nicely. These seemed like gratuitous affronts. The gods had made their point, why pile it on?

By now Pat had gotten the fire extinguisher off its bracket. I told her no, no, just get me some gas, aware that I'd somehow found the exact wrong word for what I really wanted, but again, momentarily befuddled by the stress of it all, by a sense of my own sad stupidity, by the pain in my feet. No, no, just some gas on the flames (I was at least pointing to the sink and still holding on to the tea kettle).

Pat put the fire extinguisher back on its bracket, jumped down the companion way ladder, grabbed a glass from the sink and filled it with water and threw it on the burning shelves. Another couple glasses of water and the fires went out. Dave, sitting at the helm and not knowing quite what is happening, kept sailing, close hauled now, but set to strongly to the south by the ebbing tide.

My feet hurt like hell. They were red and covered either with great big blisters where the skin hadn't broken or patches of loose, slightly wrinkled and translucent skin over oozy red flesh where they had. Pat filled a couple of plastic bags with ice. I draped the bags across my feet, the pain quickly diminished. Pat checked the chart, no immediate need to change course. I held the ice on the burns. Then we pulled out the first aid stuff. It was reasonably complete—lots of gauze pads, cling wrap, Neosporin ointment, etc.—even if some of it was getting old. I opened one of the packages, anxious to get the burns covered up and get out on the deck, but Pat had the idea of taking some pictures first and while we still have something of a cell phone connection, sending them to her brother Mike, a physician in Massachusetts, who's more than once helped us out while we were sailing with advise or prescriptions. Then we got out the gauze pads, smeared them with the ointment so the gauze wouldn't stick to the raw looking wounds, added some more pads for cushioning, wrapped the whole thing with cling wrap. We did a decent first aid job of it, thanks to the cling wrap, but what I'd thought were plentiful supplies would not last much beyond the first time we need to change the bandages.

We sailed into Tangier. There was a certain amount of confusion over the docking, somebody else was in our spot. Mr. Parks would get it sorted out, but we'd have to give him a minute. The current carried us past the marina, into the central basin where the commercial docks are. The ferry from Crisfield docked here, along with the huge ferry from Reedville at the main dock and a couple of small barges and generic workboats scattered around, but most of what we saw were crab boats. A lot of them were flying Trump 2020 flags, something I hadn't yet seen. Most of the flags were the size of lawn signs, but one boat flew two of them, each maybe seven feet at the hoist. I wonder how they didn't interfere with the crabbing. I wondered how we would feel in a town so at odds with our own liberal politics. We turned around, motored back to Parks marina. Things were still a little confused there, so we anchored rather tentatively just off the main thoroughfare. The current was strong enough that we had to keep the rudder set over hard to starboard to stay out of the channel. I stayed in the cockpit, in part to make sure we didn't swing into the channel or drag our anchor, but also to more readily answer the

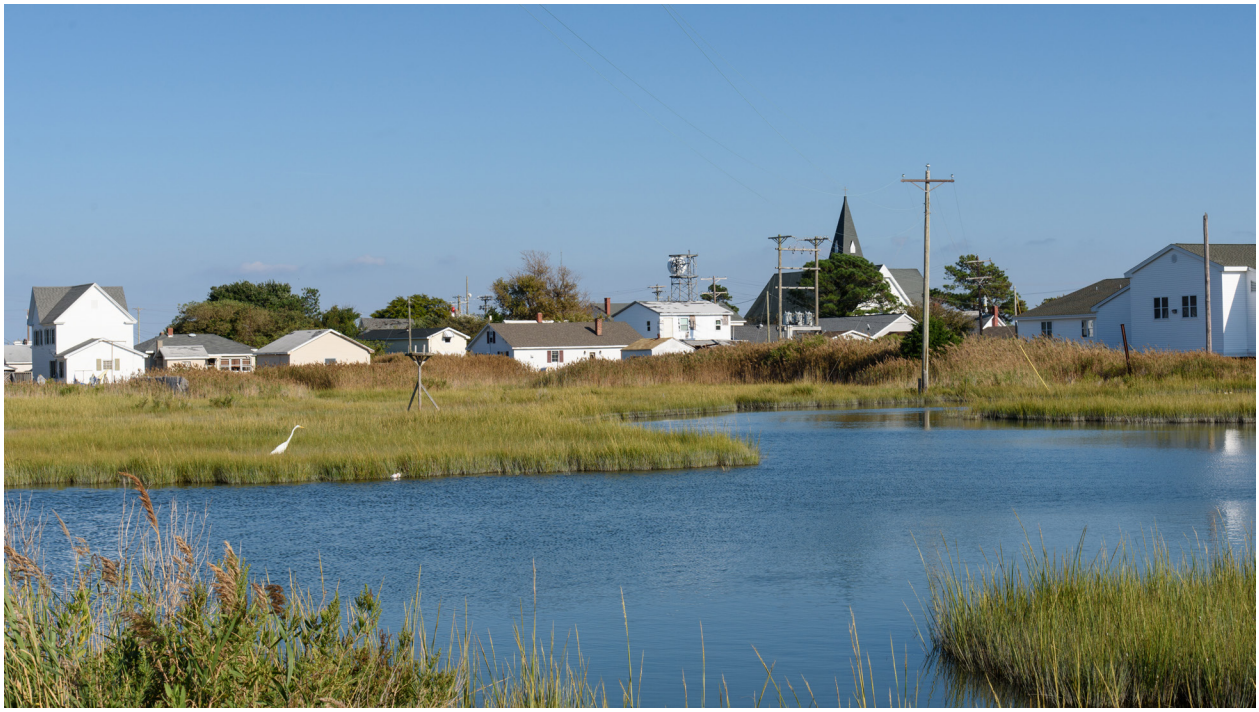
radio when Mr. Parks got the docking in order. The sky was clear brilliant blue, the sun was hot on my feet. I still felt a little shaky from the fire. I thought of how much burns have hurt when I've burned myself cooking at home or welding in the shop, and I expected that my feet would hurt badly once the adrenalin wore off, but surprisingly there was now only a moderate amount of pain.

After a bit Mr. Parks got the dock space cleared away. He called us on the vhf—we're still "yacht George"—and said to bring her on in. Dave and Pat got the anchor up, I maneuvered us toward the dock. There was a strong current running alongside the dock and a strong wind blowing off it. Mr. Parks was calling out directions on the vhf, although we were close enough so that I could hear his voice better through the air than over the radio. Every few seconds he'd call out some order or another like a harbor pilot docking a huge ocean liner. Bring the bow in, more power, no, too much, now turn. I didn't really need the instructions to come alongside a dock, and our boat with its low engine power and large amount of windage on the bowsprit behaved differently than many—but I knew that talking people into the marina with the unfamiliarly strong current was a big thing with Mr. Parks, and besides, he was impossible to ignore: at some point, you just had to do what he said.

Once we were tied up the way he said to (I'd sneak a few minor changes when he was looking away), he stood on the dock by our cockpit. He was a gaunt man, weather-beaten, eyes still bright despite his age. He said I know I called you George, but what's really your boat's name. I told him, explained that Susan B. Merryman was my mother's maternal grandmother, that Dad had built the boat and that naming her after Mom's eponym was a sort of subtle Dad-like way of naming it after Mom.

We talked on and on. Mr. Parks told me about his wife, who'd died a few years earlier. He'd named his boat after her. He was eighty-seven you know. He used to have a bigger boat, a crab dredger that he ran down near the Bay Bridge. He sold her a while ago when they changed the regulations about crab dredging. He'd lived on Tangier all his life. That was his house, the only brick house on the island. It was brick because when he built it he wanted to make sure it would stay put. He'd raised two daughters. One was the doctor at the clinic. The other was what do you call it, a psychologist down in Norfolk. That was his motor scooter over there. He used it to get around the island. His daughter had told him he couldn't ride it anymore, she was afraid he'd hurt himself on it. She kept him patched up, she was why he was still alive. It was all pretty interesting, but my feet hurt and I still felt a little shaky from the accident. There didn't seem to be any polite way to break off the conversation, anyway at all short of just turning my back on him, so I listened and nodded and smiled and tried not to think about my feet and the fire. After a bit his handheld crackled and he turned away to deal with another boat.

Dave and Pat were sorting things out in the cabin. I sat down in the cockpit and tried to tuck my feet



under me so they were in the shade of my legs, but it didn't much help, so I stood up and fiddled with the mooring lines and watched the big Trump 2020 flags ranging over the harbor.

After a bit, the three of us walked out the dock. I hobbled along slowly and brought up the rear. It hurt to bend my ankles. Mr. Parks came around the corner and stopped me, held my arm with a touch of his skinny hand. Pat and Dave walked on

"Now, I know I call your boat George, but what's your name?"

"Peter"

"You know who you're named for?"

I wasn't entirely comfortable with the question. Tangier is pretty solidly evangelical, and I doubted that he was curious about whatever Hegeman family genealogy the name might represent. It was a short hop from Jesus's disciples to in-your-face evangelism. I summoned the courage of my convictions, and mumbled.

"You're named for the apostle Peter."

"That's right. I did know that."

"And do you know what Jesus said to Peter."

I knew this, too, certainly from college classes and probably even from long ago sermons or Sunday school. I knew that what Jesus had said was 'upon this rock I build my church' and that the pun works better in French and Aramaic than in vernacular English, but I was not getting any more comfortable with the conversation. I'd like to look down at my feet, but Mr. Parks had a gaze that was hard to look away from.

"He said 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'"

"That's right," I said. I knew an off ramp when I saw it and happily swerved across who knows how many lanes of traffic to take it. "And those are wonderful words to live by."

Pat and Dave were waiting for me up ahead. Again, I couldn't think of a polite way to break off the conversation.

"There're only two men who came into the world only to do good," he said.

I was suddenly not quite so sure about that off ramp.

"Do you know who they are?"

Mr. Parks fixed me with his pale, watery eyes. A hapless wedding guest, I could only stammer and wait for what's next.

"Jesus Christ and Donald Trump."

Again, I said nothing. This time I had nothing to say.

More silence. His gaze if anything got more intense.

"Did you vote for him?"

He holds me with his glittery eye. There's no avoiding it. I took a deep breath.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Captain Parks. I did not."

Now it's his turn to be speechless.

"The whole island went for him, you know."

(It was actually 87 percent, I think, but who's counting. And who, I wondered, were the brave souls in this small and tightly knit community who voted against God's anointed instrument?)

He told me now Donald Trump had made billions, was the most successful businessman ever, and with all that money he didn't need anything for himself, he was free just to do good.

I tried to listen politely, without appearing either to agree or to dispute him.

"He brought peace to North Korea, you know."

It seemed rude to point out that maybe he'd just gotten rolled. I'd make my own exit ramp. "And if that really works, I'll be the first to give him credit."

"He called the mayor, you know."

"Did he really?" I said. I didn't believe him, but it tt turns out this was true, though the call came before the election, not after he was president.

"He's going to build the sea wall. That's what he told the mayor. He's going to cut though all the Washington red tape and just get it done."

I caught up to Pat and Dave, and we wandered into town. I'd modified my sandals with gaffer's tape so I could wear them over the bandages. My feet hurt, though given the size of the burns, not as badly as I expected. It helped to walk slowly and not to bend my ankle. A bit of a rest would have been nice, but I was sure that the burns would hurt a lot worse before long, and I wanted to see as much of the island as I could before it hurt too much to walk.

The streets were narrow, there weren't any cars. Near the ferry landing, the sidewalks and streets were crowded with day-trippers who milled around the couple souvenir stands, which were mostly stocked with post cards and crab-themed regalia. A young woman drove through the scrum in a golf cart, hawking island history tours. We walked on. Once out of the tourist area, there weren't many other people walking, and those that were walking didn't look like they lived here. The islanders mostly rode


Elk River

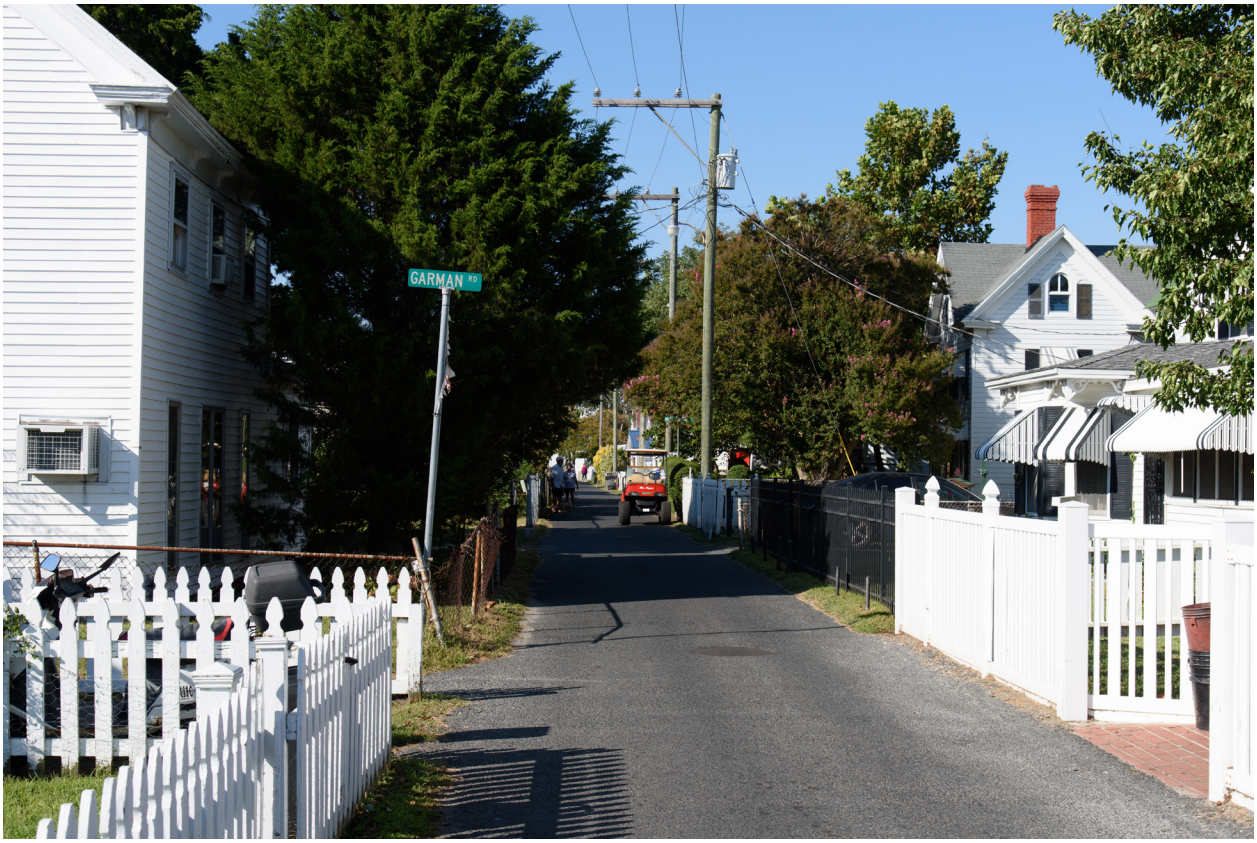
around in golf carts; a lot of the golf carts flew TRUMP 2020 flags.

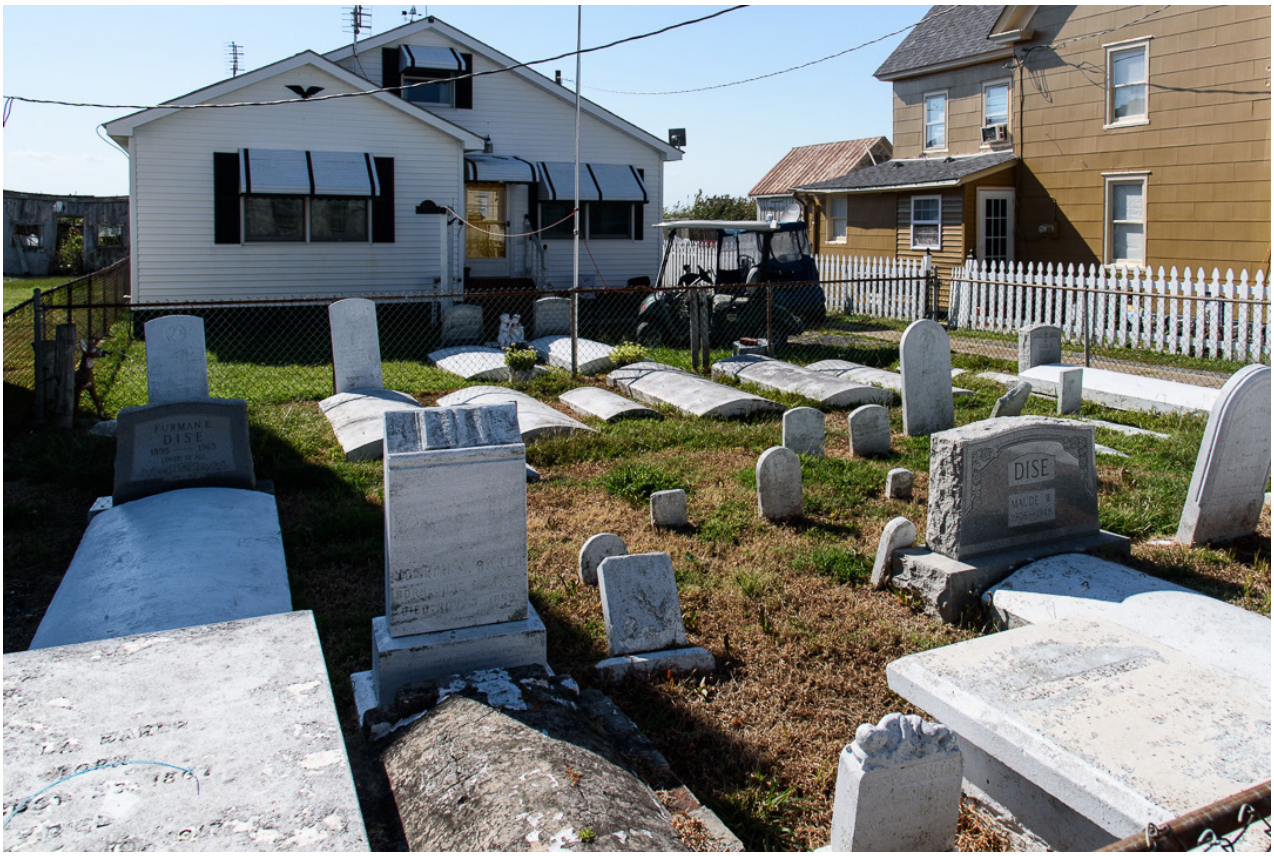
We found the grocery store. There wasn't much there. Some canned goods, a lot of junk food and soda, a little bit of detergent, stuff like that. There was a woman sitting behind the checkout counter. She didn't seem too happy to see us. When the southern hospitality thing goes missing, you really feel its absence. We were obviously outsiders, and I wondered if we weren't instantly pegged as godless liberals from the mainland. It was a much different vibe from Mr. Parks'. He was mystified, shocked, staggered, that I had voted for that woman, but was shocked in kind of the way an ornithologist would be shocked to see an albatross soaring over a cornfield in Kansas—such things shouldn't happen, but the poor bird isn't evil, just hopelessly lost. Not so here. The woman behind the counter had a gaze like the front sight of a rifle.

We made a quick circuit of the store. It felt as if nothing has moved off the shelves in fifteen years. We approached the woman at the checkout counter and asked after first aid supplies. She directed us to the proper shelf. It was nearly empty: a couple boxes of band aids with price stickers that had turned brown with age, and the biggest tube of Neosporin ointment I've ever seen. We'd have to find our supplies somewhere else.

We walk on. The houses were small and neat. They generally sat behind white picket or sometimes chain link fences. A lot of the houses had much of their tiny front lawn taken up with family graveyards. Most of the graves were topped with heavy curved slabs of concrete or stone. There were a couple graveyards along the road, but dry real estate is scarce in Tangier, and there's not enough room for everyone who's died, so families bury their dead in their yards. Many of the graves here go back into the nineteenth century and here on the high ground it's still possible to imagine them as reasonably secure. On other parts of the island the dead have not been so lucky. In 2012, Hurricane Sandy chewed away at the shoreline of the north island, unearthed coffins and bones. Here the ground is high enough so that Sandy merely flicked its tongue along the foundations and graves without damaging much, as if tasting a meal it would someday return to devour.

We paused at one corner. There was a coke machine sitting on the corner across from us. It seemed odd, out in the open like that—I realize that it's the second that we've seen—but then again there aren't any filling stations here, where else would you put them? My phone chirped. It was the first cell service





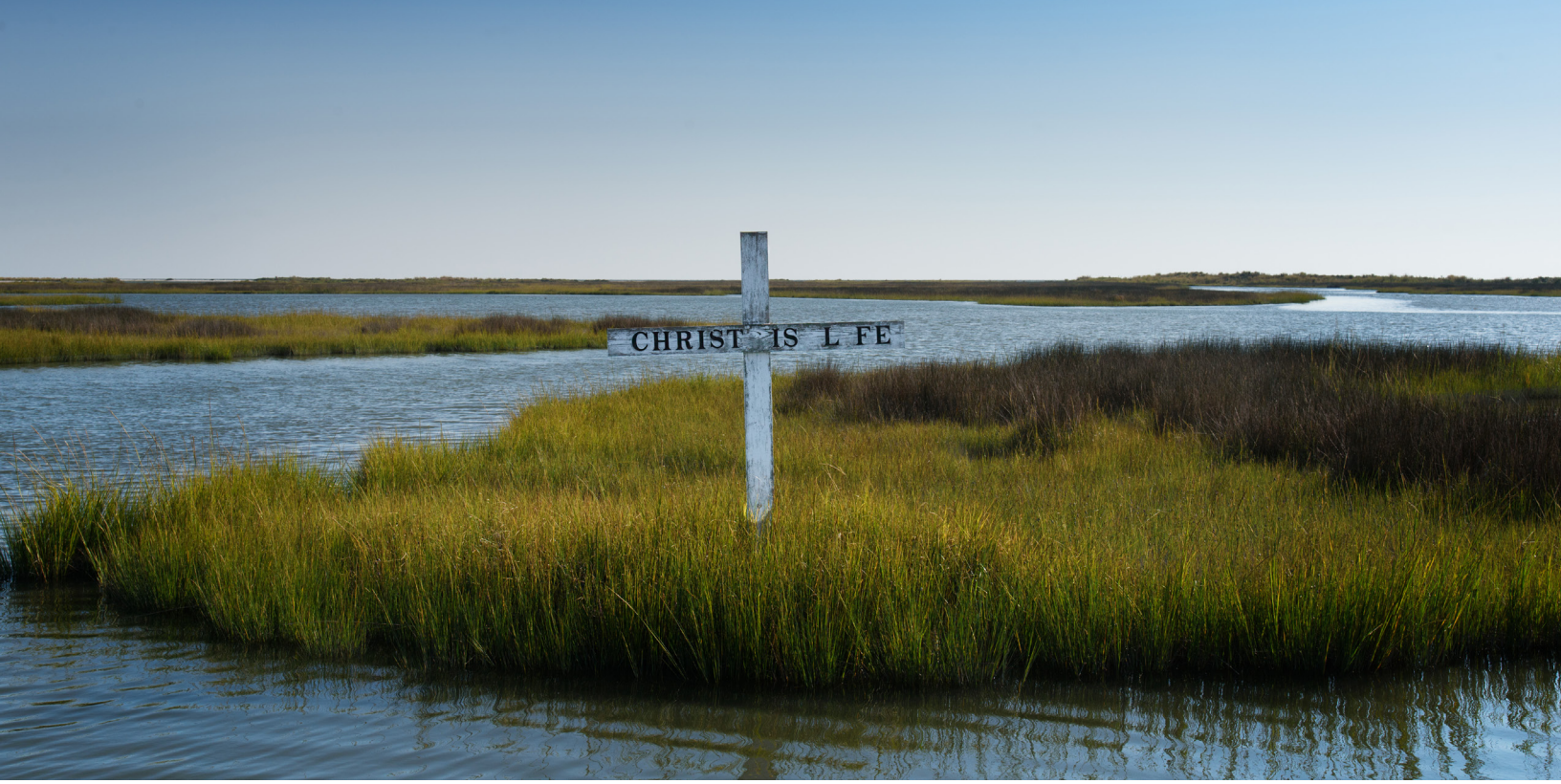
since we've been on the island. There was a voice mail from Pat's brother. He'd looked at the photos of my feet. He tells me to clean the wounds twice a day and to get some stuff called seldane to put on them, the ointment we used on the boat won't really do much good.

We walked on. Every block or two somebody had put up a sign that celebrated—or at least noted—some piece of the town's history. One of them told the story of the parson who had converted the island to Methodism, back in the day. Another told of the sheriff who sometime in the thirties confronted a kid who wasn't in church of a Sunday morning. The kid told the sheriff to bug off. The sheriff followed the kid home, and then shot him in the chest on the kid's own front porch. That was a bit much, even on Tangier, and the sheriff was actually jailed for a time. The victim, somewhat surprisingly, survived. A year later the shooter was back in Tangier and back in office as the town's sheriff. Then one night the karmic wheel turned, and the sheriff was shot dead through a window of his own house. The murder was never solved.

By now we'd reached the island's new health clinic. It was an attractive building with a welcoming porch. We, or rather Pat, who was thinking more clearly than I, figured that they must have some kind of a pharmacy, they must sell some basic prescriptions and first aid. We walked in, I explained what I'd done, assured them that my physician has seen pictures, etc., etc. Second degree burns, I don't have to see the doctor, I'm sure that she's busy, I just need the supplies and to get a prescription filled.

The receptionist explained that don't have their own pharmacy, so they couldn't either fill a prescription or sell us the supplies. I hemmed and hawed for a moment, asked if she had any suggestions. She told me to wait a minute and went into the back. My feet hurt, and I still felt a little jittery, almost as if I were on a caffeine-fueled talking jag, and I felt oddly torn between a desired to hide my feet, wish it all away, and to explain over and over how I'd done it, but how I wasn't really that stupid, I was really a pretty good sailor, not some idiot that set his feet on fire. The receptionist returned with another woman, a nurse, I think. The nurse asked a few questions, peered over the counter to look at my feet, and again says, wait here.

Another woman walked in the front door. She was dressed in casual business clothes, not the kind of flowery tops that nurses often wear. She had a stethoscope around her neck and a definite air of authority. We figured that if what Mr. Parks said was true, she must be his daughter, though she looked



way younger. (She was, in fact, his granddaughter). She glanced around the waiting room, immediately noticed my feet.

What happened to you? Her voice was a pleasant mixture of efficiency and warmth.

I started on the same story I told the receptionist and the nurse. I realized that she'd heard a lot worse, probably quite often. There were a lot of accidents on the water. People made mistakes, it was what happened.

He says he's talked to his doctor, the receptionist says

Have the burns been exposed to saltwater?

I don't think so, I told her.

How about your sandals, the straps of your sandals? Did you tell your doctor you're around saltwater?

I assume he knows, I said. He knows we're on a boat in Chesapeake Bay.

He might not know about vibrio, she told me. It's rampant here in the brackish water. You can lose limbs because of it. It's a big problem for the watermen. They had a young guy in here just the other day, he was a real mess. Just make sure you tell your doctor about the vibrio, and don't get your feet anywhere near saltwater.

The nurse handed me a blue plastic shopping bag. It was full of supplies. There were gauze pads in various sizes, little ones for cleaning and big non-stick ones for dressing the wounds a couple rolls of cling wrap, a bottle of sterile water, various swabs. It looked like it would last a couple weeks (though in fact, with changing the dressings and cleaning the wounds twice a day it only got us back to the mainland). Then the doctor went to the back and returned with a small jar of the special antibacterial ointment I was to use in place of the Neosporin and again told me to tell my doctor about the vibrio. By now one of her scheduled patients had shown up. She greeted him warmly and walked with him back to an examining room.

The nurses up front sprung into action. They told us how to arrange to get a prescription filled in Crisfield, how to get it delivered on the daily ferry service ("tell your doctor to have them put it in Rita's box and say you're at Milton's marina. They're kin, she'll know where to find you"). They faxed my insurance info over to the pharmacy, gave me a phone so I can call brother-in-law Mike, "you've probably noticed we don't have any cell here.")

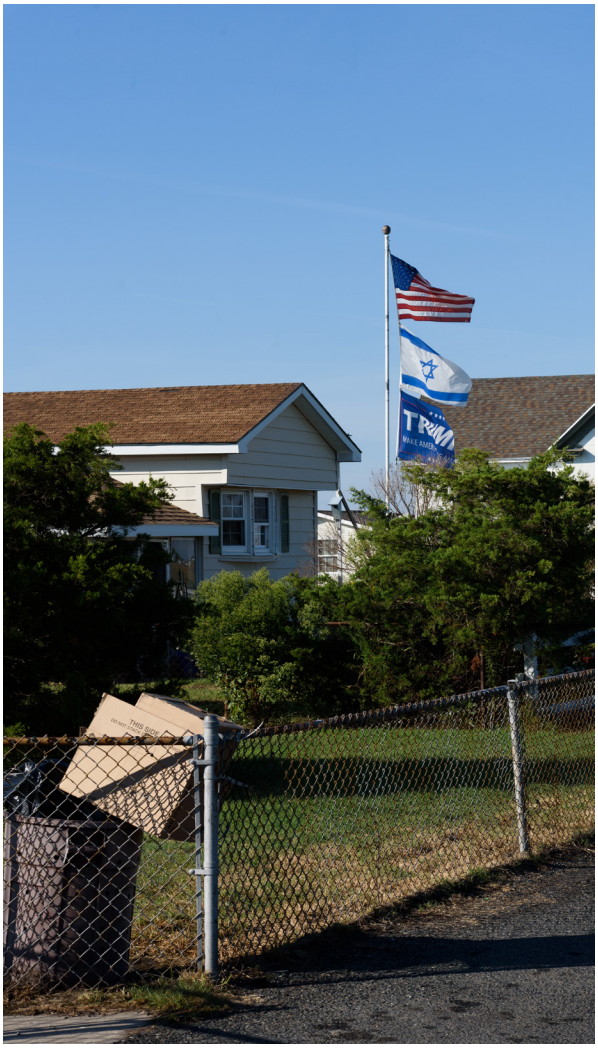
I asked them what we owe for the first aid supplies. Nothing, they said. I said that I'd like to pay something, they'd been so generous and given me so much. Still nothing. I settled on getting the name of the foundation that helps support them and promised that I would make a contribution once I got home.

I was getting treated, I realize, as an honorary waterman or islander. It was what they did here—they hung together and helped each other survive either their own stupidity and bad luck. Help one other survive the hostile world that surrounds their fragile home.

We walked out of the health clinic into the same brilliant light, the same flawless blue sky. Pat and

Dave asked how my feet were, if I was up for more walking. I said sure, let's go. The feet hurt, but they would probably hurt worse tomorrow, and who knows when we'd get back here. We turned into the south wind to make the longer circuit that takes us back north along the West Ridge Road.

Once we turned off the main ridge, on to factory road, we quickly ran out of solid land. We walked along a narrow causeway across a vast green salt marsh, all of it covering and uncovering with the tide, now running out. The town was behind us now, insignificant seeming against the brilliant green cordgrass, oozy black mud, sinuous water. Here and there boats had been run into the mud and abandoned. Most of the abandoned boats were skiffs, but some were bigger. There was a mix of wooden boats and fiberglass. The wood boats slowly rotted and sank into the mud. The fiberglass remained, and would so, perhaps, longer than the island.



South of the road was nothing but water and brilliant green cordgrass. The grass seemed to float on the water: black water, green islands, flawless blue sky. Just across the water, at what was now the edge of a little hummock of grass, somebody had put up a sign, "christ is l fe". The i in life was missing, and the paint had weathered till you could see the grain of the wood, but the cross had been carefully built, the letters were an attractive serif typeface, raised characters applied to the wood, not just a quick paint job.

We three non-believers from afar paused in front of the sign. I took a picture. Such overt religiosity had always discomfited me. I'd grown up with a good episcopal mother, who'd dragged us to church through our high school years and who was herself a good church-goer till the day that she died, but the evangelicals had always seemed a species apart. Some in my mother's family were evangelicals, much to our, and even Mom's consternation. I had an uncle who was in many ways a brilliant naturalist, but who utterly, totally rejected any notion of evolution since it was contrary to the infallible truth of the Bible. My uncle saw the creation as an extension of his own life, which Jesus watched over and ordered in meticulous detail. He told of once when his first wife, my mother's sister, had been swimming on the Jersey shore a rip current had started to carry her away out to sea. She would have been a goner, but then Jesus sent a wave to bring her safely ashore. When my sister died of breast cancer, suffering terribly the whole way, my uncle told me how the cancer was Jesus's way of bringing her to Him.

As we stood looking at the cross, I tried to examine all this. My discomfort with the evangelicals grew out of the sense that they neatly divided the world into the saved and the damned, and that it was pretty clear which group I and all that I loved must be assigned to. But I also had to admit that there was a certain amount of condescension mixed in with the unease: I could never understand how anyone old enough to no longer believe in Santa Clause could publicly admit to such childish ideas, as say, my uncle's notion of a personal God sending rogue waves to aid a trouble swimmer, let alone breast cancer in order to bring my sister to Him. What are you, stupid? I wasn't comfortable with that, either. I thought that if we were wandering through the wilds of Bhutan we would discover at least as many Buddhist shrines and stupas there as we had churches and crosses here, but that we would regard the stupas either objectively, as cultural artifacts, or with reverence, as expressions of a mysterious faith that we could respect and even admire even if we didn't share or even understand it.

We continued along the Factory Road till we got to the other ridge of the island, turned back north on the West Ridge Road. The island was more sparsely settled over here than on the main ridge, the yards a bit more ragged. We passed a couple more coke machines sitting by the side of the road, passed a couple houses where the golf carts or atvs were parked on platforms raised a foot or so above the ground. I wondered how the houses would fare in water that high.

Toward the north of the west ridge road the island was again more densely settled. One of the houses had an impressive big flagpole in the front lawn. They flew a us flag, an Israeli flag, a trump 2020 flag.

I wonder what they think about climate change, one of us said.

Fake news.

Build the wall.

Donald's going to build them their sea wall. He promised

Just like he was going to give all that money to those charities.

All true, yet it seemed a little churlish to make fun of the islander's politics. We were guests here, and I in particular was hobbling around with a big blue plastic shopping bag full of first aid supplies that I very much needed, courtesy of the islanders' kindness and generosity. But the big flags made politics very hard to ignore.

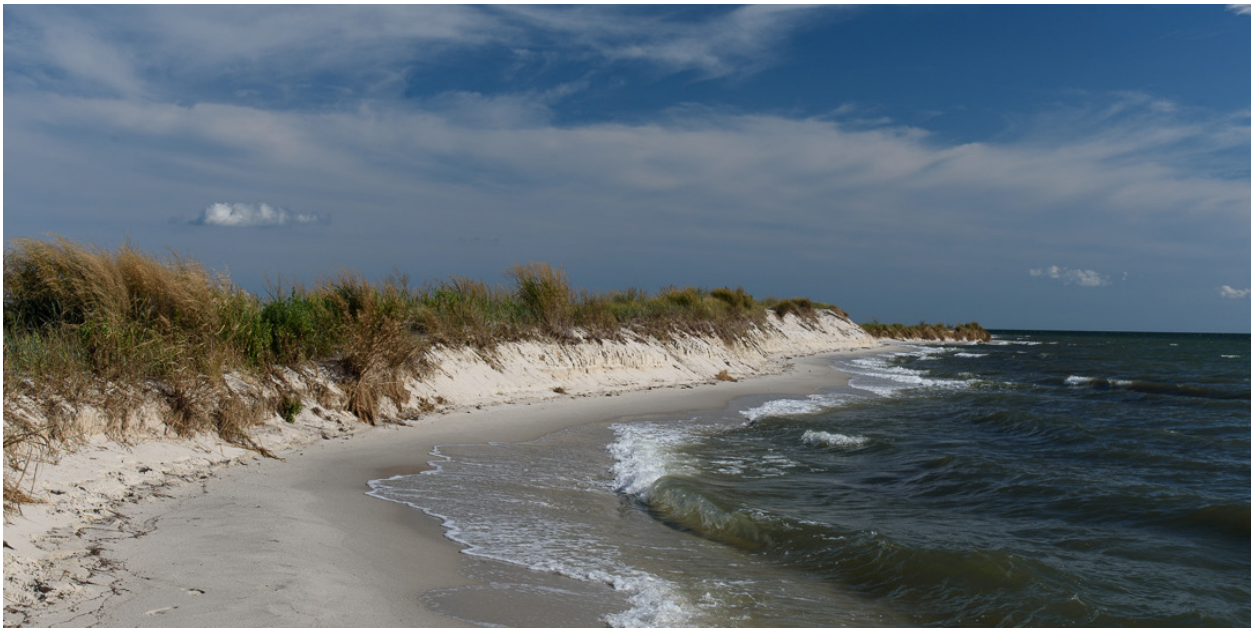
It was hard not to feel the islanders' dilemma. In the blink of an eye a culture, a way of life, an identity that had sustained them for centuries had come under assault, had begun to fray in the face of economic and cultural forces from far away on the mainland. Now as seawater rose and once solid ground subsided even the land under their feet was disappearing. We outsiders shrug, say it's inevitable, get used to it, your time is done. We don't live here, our families aren't buried in the vanishing earth.

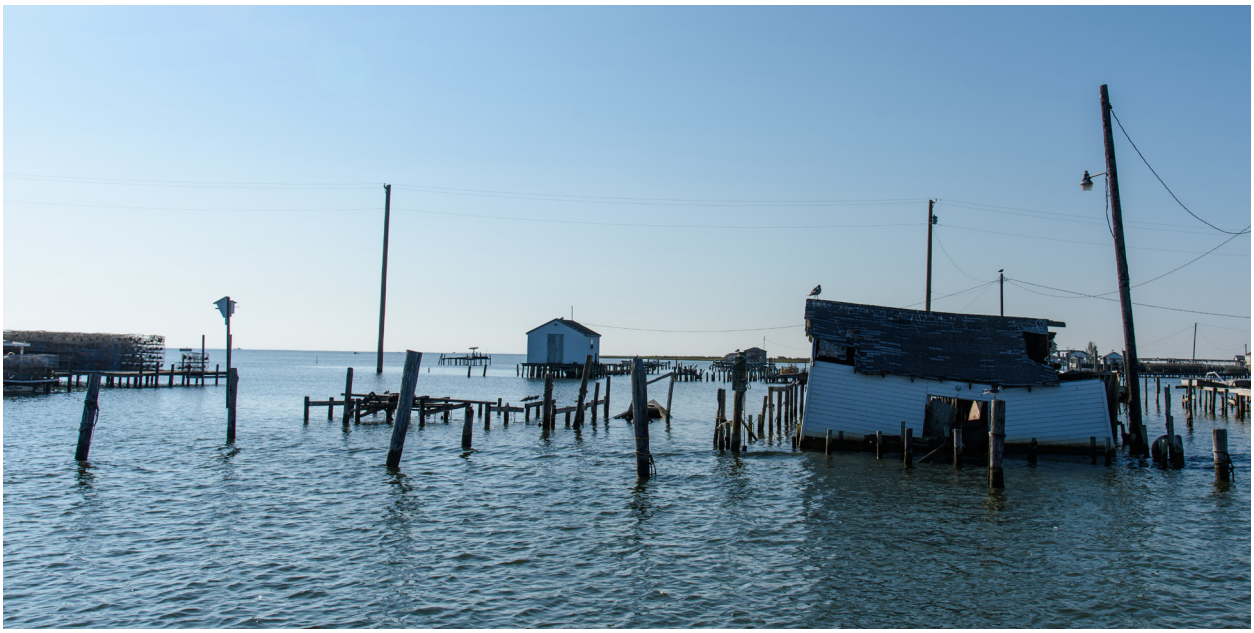
No wonder the wall strikes such a chord. A seawall for the island, a border wall for the country.

We walked on under the same flawless sky, back to our boat, tied up safely at Mr. Park's wharf. The wind blew from the south across a wide expanse of Chesapeake Bay, broke against the low shores of the island, sucked away tiny grains of sand. Herons and ibises on their outlandishly long legs waded across the mud flats, eyes searching for prey.

We spent another day on the island, walking around, eating the incomparable soft crabs. Pat bicycled down to a lovely beach at the south end of the island. At one time there had been a British fort out on the point. Now there were just ruins well out toward the empty horizon. I stayed on the boat and nursed my feet. Maybe next time.

We would be sailing to Onancock next, up a long winding river on the Virginia Eastern Shore. Pat and I had been there before, Dave had not. It was an interesting town. Here and there were signs of an older economy that had struggled and died—the TV repair shop where somebody was now trying to sell marine electronics (unsuccessfully, by outward appearance)—and along with the old houses that had been fixed up into gingerbready showpieces there were others that the trumpet vines were claiming for





their own, but there also were restaurants and art galleries and a high end food store selling a dozen different boutique olive oils. Wandering around town we'd met foreign tourists, engineers from the nasa flight facility at Wallop's Island, an artist whose family had been the one of the last to move off Hog Island, the barrier island now owned by the Virginia Nature Conservancy. It was an interesting town, but it was not Tangier. It was not another world. In sailing to Onancock, we would be sailing back to the mainland.

When we got ready to leave the next morning I found Mr. Parks and paid the very reasonable amount that we owed for two nights wharfage. He asked me about the auxiliary engine I had in my boat. Oh it's a small Volvo, I told him.

It's an eggbeater, he said.

Good name for it, I said. It is an eggbeater.

He fixed me with his pale blue eyes. It's a little eggbeater, he said.

It's a very little eggbeater.

We talked a little more. He told me what he had for an engine in his boat, and he told me that I had a good-looking wife, I was lucky to have her.

But you're a Democrat, he said, still mystified at that albatross so clueless as to fetch up in Kansas.

No, Captain Parks, I'm an independent.

I'm an independent, too, he said. I sort of smiled and looked off at the traffic in the channel, again the hapless wedding guest.

But you voted for her, he said.

I did vote for her.

Well, you're alright. Take care of that pretty wife of yours.

We cast off our lines, motored into the channel, turned toward the east. Mr. Parks waved from his wharf. The current carried us into the main basin. This had once been in the middle of the island, now it was perched on the northeast corner of it—nothing to the north but stretches of cord grass. On the charts it was outlined blocked out in pale green, land that was submerged at low tide. Land that had been created in the deep past out of fire and then ice, that had ever so briefly nurtured families and their graveyards and homes, now washed by the ever higher tides.

In the middle of the basin the buoys changed, and the red marks that had been on our right-hand side as we came in from the west (red right returning) were now on our left as we motored east in the channel to Tangier Sound. We were quickly past any solid land, past the wharves that bridged earth and sea. Now the watermen's shacks were built on pilings sunk into the mud, connected to the dry land only here and there by haphazardly strung electrical wires. Some of the shacks were clearly going concerns, piled high with crab pots, with boats tied up at the pilings, crews sorting the catch, brand names painted on the siding. Some of the shacks had long since been abandoned. They seemed almost like wading birds, herons on their incongruously stilt-like legs. These were the structures I'd seen sailing through in the rain and fog many years before, that had drawn me back after many years. Relics of the pre-industrial past, outposts in a post-apocalyptic future.

It was just past high tide now. When you looked past the shacks to the southeast there was nothing but water and that brilliant blue sky. The shallow

mudflats would protect the crab houses against the waves in ordinary settled weather, but I hated to think what it would look like here in a Sandy or Isabel or Florence or really in any bad weather out of the east. Struggling fisheries was a story you saw up and down the coast—ever fewer watermen chasing an ever-dwindling catch, a way of life even older than the savior who made his disciples fishers of men, now as expendable to the modern world as the resource it depended upon. Only here the fishers must also watch as their very homes sank into the Bay.

To the north of us, out of the channel but still in open water was another white cross. It was on an even smaller clump of grass than the one we'd noted two days earlier, and in much more open water, a remnant of North Island that had once supported families, churches, communities. Through binoculars I could make out the letters: jesus is lif .

The tiny islet, I thought, would not be there much longer. I wondered what would become of the cross. Would someone salvage it, replant it on more stable ground?

It was no longer quite so hard to see why so many people here rejected any talk of global warming or even of land subsidence. To accept that sea level is inexorably rising and that the land that sustained your family and loved ones is a momentary, almost random fluctuation in a infinitely long geologic history is to admit that it's all as good as over, that you aren't really the master of your fate or the beloved protectorate of a personal God, but a bit player acted upon by forces as vast as geology. How tempting to put your faith in a big beautiful wall that will hold off time and tide.

We motored on past Port Isobel, the eastern most of what broadly made up Tangier Island. Looking out over the flats to the south we could see the twin trump 2020 flags floating over the horizon. The boat itself was out of sight, below the horizon, the flags seemed almost like those odd illusions when you've sailed too long in the mist and the fog. Only here the air was clear with the beauty of fall.

Past the flashing green daymark at the end of the channel we turned into the wind, raised our sails, then fell off the wind on the starboard tack that would take us out of Tangier. My feet still hurt, and I'd have to leave the sail and anchor handling to Dave and Pat, but I wasn't feeling quite so oppressed by the sense of my own stupidity. Sailing and seakeeping were worthy endeavors, and you'd always try to do well and to do a little better today than you did yesterday, but they were a practice, not some absolute perfection. You'd sooner or later do something stupid. Sooner or later you'd have to depend on your shipmates, or on the kindness of strangers.

We shaped our course toward Onancock, toward the mainland. The sails filled, stood perfect against that same flawless sky. Water gurgled along the hull as the boat gathered speed. I looked back at Tangier, sorry to be leaving. The big trump 2020 flags were now out of view—below the horizon, lost in the haze.

Most of the island was gone, too, nothing more than an improbable finger-painted smear of green against blue, all vanished but the strangely elongated steeples that hovered mysteriously in the refractive air just over the horizon, shimmering hymns to community and hope, floating just above a roiling sea of troubles.